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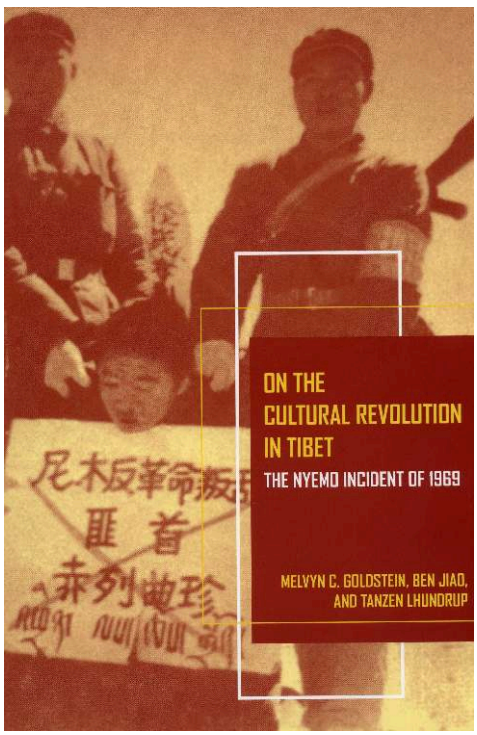
1 In volumes one and two of his *History of Modern Tibet*, Melvyn Goldstein documents the events during the first half of the twentieth century that culminated in the arrival of the PLA in Lhasa in 1951 and the incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China. The second volume of that history leaves off in 1955, just as Mao launches the Socialist Transformation Campaign throughout China and before the Khamba uprising in Sichuan Province against the implementation of socialist reforms spills over into Tibet. This new study, researched and co-written with two PRC-based Tibetologists, Ben Jiao and Tanzen Lhundrup, begins some 15 years later in the midst of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet. The Nyemo incident itself, in which Trinley Chödrön, a young nun believed to be possessed by deities, launched attacks against local officials and PLA troops in a rural area not far from Lhasa, has been interpreted by a number of



writers on the history of modern Tibet as a nationalist revolt against the Chinese along the lines of the 1959 revolt that saw the Dalai Lama seek refuge in India. The authors reject this interpretation and instead situate the events in Nyemo within the context of the Cultural Revolution in Tibet. Offering a level of detail hitherto unavailable, they claim they are able to give a full account of the conflict in Nyemo and its causes. This work is based on 75 taped interviews conducted by the researchers with people who lived in Nyemo at the time of the incident (these interviews are part of a larger project by Goldstein and his co-researchers to produce a Tibetan Oral History Archive). The researchers also managed to obtain a set of Chinese documents from the time of the Cultural Revolution that contains reports written by teams sent from Lhasa to investigate the incident, including interrogations and confessions of villagers and cadres who had participated.

2 As the Cultural Revolution began to unfold throughout China in 1966, the Party leadership in Tibet was uneasy about the prospect of unleashing Red Guards in Tibet. With the arrival of new Red Guards from inland China the campaign against established leaders within the Regional Party Committee intensified, with the radical revolutionary groups eventually combining to form the Gyenlo faction (the Revolutionary Rebels), while organisations supportive of the Regional Party Committee became Nyamdre (the Alliance). The first part of the book documents in considerable detail the escalation of inter-factional conflict in Lhasa, with violent battles being fought between the two factions by early 1967, and government offices and neighbourhoods in Lhasa controlled by one or the other faction. This inter-factional conflict played out in rural areas such as Nyemo as well, with established local leaders, both Tibetan and Han, usually siding with Nyamdre. The authors want to show how the Gyenlo faction evolved a strategy to capitalise on the grievances of the local population. Villagers were angry over excessive grain sales to the government and feared the impending collectivisation of agriculture. Gyenlo sought to channel this anger against the Nyamdre leaders, promising to relieve the burden of these policies once in power, and used Mao's own revolutionary ideology to justify rebellion against the authorities. The conflict between Gyenlo and Nyamdre thus provides a master narrative for interpreting the events that took place in Nyemo. The authors acknowledge Tibetan resentment over the prohibition on religious practice, the dismantling of temples and monasteries, and the house-by-house searches for and destruction of religious objects. But mainly we are offered a picture of Gyenlo leaders using religion as a way to motivate the masses for rebellion.

3 The authors are at a loss to explain the syncretic and millenarian elements of Trinley Chödrön's religious vision. Her followers believed that she was possessed by Ani Gongmey Gyemo, aunt of the legendary deity-hero Gesar, defender of Tibet. She promised supernatural protection and commanded her followers to make war against the enemies of Buddhism. At the same time she praised Mao, whom she regarded as a manifestation of Manjuśri, and claimed to be acting on his behalf as well. From this the authors conclude that Trinley Chödrön and her followers accepted the sovereignty of the Chinese Communist state and did not have a separatist agenda.

4 Gyenlo's "Army of the Gods," as they came to be called, initiated attacks on government and army compounds throughout the region over the course of several weeks in June 1969. At the same time, the nun orchestrated a wave of brutal maimings and killings aimed at cadres she regarded as enemies, as well as local Tibetans who had ridiculed or offended her. PLA reinforcements were eventually sent to Nyemo to re-impose order,

and the fighters with the Army of the Gods were rounded up, along with Trinley Chödrön. Out of some 500 participants, according to Chinese records cited in the book, 105 leaders were punished, of which 14 were executed, including Trinley Chödrön. The other 400 were made to attend political study classes before being released.

5 With the arrival of PLA reinforcements imminent, the Gyenlo leadership attempted to distance itself from the nun and her followers, blaming the attacks by the Army of the Gods on "reactionary nuns, lamas, and class enemies, not on the actions of the revolutionary masses" (p. 141). They insisted that the uprising was brought about through "materialist" causes – i.e., the implementation of the Democratic Reforms. Thus, the authors' hypothesis that the leaders of Gyenlo were pursuing a political agenda and not a religious one, however compelling, is exactly what those leaders needed to say to save themselves following the reassertion of authority by the army and the state. In effect, once their own more ambitious combined religious/political strategy had failed, they needed the uprising to be seen as just another outgrowth of the political conflict that epitomised the Cultural Revolution. The PLA also wanted to bring the incident to a close, so it claimed that "most of the villagers who had participated had really been duped by the supernatural arguments of the nun and the other mediums" (p. 149). The testimony of the participants collected by the researchers through interviews also declares the mediums to be frauds. But the pressure to reconstruct the Nyemo incident in line with the officially acceptable narrative – in both the interrogations documented by Chinese investigators immediately after the incident and in the recollections of participants many years later – is difficult to ignore. Confession and self-criticism are part of a well-worn script that provides for the lenient treatment and rehabilitation of those who go along. The material at the disposal of the authors is detailed and impressive, but making sense of Trinley Chödrön and the Army of the Gods is a little like attempting to describe and understand the heretical religion of the Cathars in fourteenth century Languedoc using the records compiled by the Inquisition.

6 The authors' main claim is that, unlike the 1959 revolt led by Chushigandru, which sought to drive the Chinese from Tibet, this was not a "spontaneous nationalistic uprising" or "a revolt aimed at creating an independent Tibet," but an "outgrowth of a careful strategy orchestrated by a Maoist revolutionary faction (Gyenlo) to seize control of its county from a rival revolutionary organization (Nyamdre)" (p. 162). They maintain that the villagers had in fact internalised the ideals of the new Communist state to the extent that they saw in Gyenlo a model for "revolutionarily acceptable revolt" (p. 163). In this the villagers were both seeking and conforming to norms of socialist behaviour. At the same time, the use of religion by the Gyenlo leadership was both pragmatic and cynical, capitalising on the superstitious vulnerability of Tibetan villagers. The implication is that none of this would have happened if the Gyenlo leadership had not permitted and encouraged Tibetans to succumb to religious frenzy – what the authors themselves refer to as "Gesar hysteria" (p. 98).

7 In fact the authors gloss over the extent to which cultural practices suppressed by the new state reappeared overnight and quickly became widespread once it became clear that they were permitted – burning incense, prayers, the exchange of katas. But the same thing happened after 1980 following the post-Mao reforms and continues right up to the present whenever policies on religious practice are relaxed. The underlying memory of religious practice has never disappeared, and whatever its sources, it is

deeply rooted in Tibetan culture and society. The revival of religion defies a strictly economic explanation – it recurs during periods of prosperity as well as during periods of deprivation. For the Chinese, of course, this indicates (now as much as then) the obstinate backwardness of Tibetan society. But it is not a question of the return of the "old society," as the Chinese contend whenever unrest breaks out in Tibet. The events in Nyemo and elsewhere in 1969 are not altogether unlike the waves of protest that occurred after 1987 and again in 2008. If the economic objectives of Tibetans have indeed been realised in the years since the end of the Cultural Revolution, then how are we to explain this recurring protest and the cultural and religious forms that it continues to take?

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